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Malaysia's rich history within the UN

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A HIGH point in Malaysian foreign policy since Merdeka thirty nine years ago must have been the election of a Malaysian diplomat to the Presidency of the 51st United Nations General Assembly on 17th September, a first for Malaysia as it was a first for each of the 50 countries which had provided presidents for the 185 member United Nations (UN).

No nations has been honoured twice, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, the Malaysian Permanent Representative at the UN since 1988, joins a long procession of distinguished global diplomats and statesmen who have held the post, including P H Spaak of Belgium, the first president in 1946, Carlos P Romulo of the Philippines (1949), Lester Pearson of Canada (1952), Mrs Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (Nehru's sister) in 1953, Amintore Fanfani of Italy (1965), Adam Malik of Indonesia (1971), Salim A Salim of Tanzania (1979), Joseph N Garba of Nigeria (1989) and Professor Diogo Freitas do Amaral of Portugal, Razali's immediate predecessor.

Malaysia has also achieved a number of other distinctions, among which are a split two-year term membership of the prestigious and all-powerful Security Council in 1965 (shared with Czechoslovakia), a full two-year term in 1989-90 when Malaysia (Razali was the Permanent Representative), together with Cuba, Columbia and Yemen (known as the Gang of Four) in the Security Council opposed Operation Desert Storm against Iraq and demanded more time for talks to get Iraqis out of Kuwait without fighting, Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's election as President of the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (Icdait) in 1987, Datuk Abu Hassan Omar's (a former foreign minister) chairmanship of the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees in 1989, the election of Justice Datuk Lal Chand Vohrah to the International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law committed in the Territory of the former Yugoslavia for a four-year term starting in 1993, Ambassador Datuk Peter Lai's chairmanship of the UN Tin Conference in 1980-81 and Tan Sri Manikavasagam's election as chairman of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1969 beating a determined fellow Asean rival, the Filipino Secretary of Labour.

The Malaysian Minister of Labour won the contest because Malaysia then, as now, had a better international image than The Philippines.

Malaysia joined the UN on September 1957, seventeen days after Merdeka (31st August), becoming the UN's 82nd member. During the last ten years of its membership, Malaysia quietly upgraded its participation at the UN, adding quality.

It no longer just settles for going through the annual rituals of making speeches, pledging support and voting on resolutions. It has raised its role to a higher level consistent with Malaysia's newfound confidence and prosperity.

Malaysia, under Dr. Mahathir, has played, is playing and will continue to play an important role at the multilateral level.

Successive governments have made the UN an important aspect of Malaysian foreign policy, starting with the nation's founding Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra. They considered, and rightly too, that the UN is the only "safety blanket" for small countries with limited manpower and defense resources such as Malaysia.

Neither Tengku, Tun Razak, Hussein Onn, nor Dr. Mahathir have

extravagant and the utopian ideas about the UN. However, each of them proclaimed Malaysia's loyalty to the UN Charter. When the UN wanted troops for its intervention in the Congo civil war of 1960-63, Malaysia was one of the first countries to participate in the UN's peacekeeping efforts.

Today, Malaysia has peacekeeping forces in Bosnia Herzegovina (now under the US-led Protective Implementation Forces or Ifor), Angola, Western Sahara, Liberia, Kuwait-Iraq and Zagreb. Before the withdrawal of Unosom (UN Operations in Somalia) in December 1994, Malaysia was the seventh largest country contributing to the UN Peacekeeping Operations with a total number of 2,844 officers and soldiers.

At present Malaysia has 1,647 military as well as police personnel serving overseas. Malaysian Armed Forces have also served under the UN banner in Mozambique. Requests for Malaysian troops to serve in Haiti and Burundi were turned down by the government.

Malaysia participated in peacekeeping efforts in the Congo and in Bosnia Herzegovina, underscoring its commitment to the maintenance of peace and international security.

Any violation of the UN Charter could well make Malaysia a victim also. It is incumbent upon Malaysia to always strive to uphold its national sovereignty and territorial integrity which is enshrined in and guaranteed by the UN Charter, and to assist within its capacity, troubled-lands.

Unlike the US, China, Asean, Great Britain and the Commonwealth, the UN has dominated Malaysian foreign policy only intermittently: in the 1960s when the nations's right to exist was challenged by a belligerent Indonesia, the UN came to Malaysia's aid. When Dr. Mahathir came to power in 1981, the UN became an important instrument of Malaysian foreign policy.

The UN provides Malaysia and other nations with an excellent point of contact with other countries and non-governmental organisations where issues of national concern and interest may be raised; a forum for projecting Malaysian policy to the world as well as for home consumption.

By being at the UN in New York and Geneva, in particular, Malaysia has access to many countries, especially those in Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Oceania where it has a very, very limited number of diplomatic representatives.

The UN enables Malaysia to reach out to all these people and deals with those with whom Malaysia does not have diplomatic missions.

The value of UN, past, present and future is immense. The UN is an appropriate place to discuss sensitive problems and make deals. It is an excellent environment to conduct "quiet diplomacy" amidst international hustle and bustle.

I can now confirm that "the secret and tortuous discussions" which led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the People's Republic of China took place at the UN between the Malaysian permanent Representative and China's permanent Representative.

Malaysia's national security is of paramount importance in Malaysian foreign policy and this is manifested by the activities of Malaysian diplomats at the UN, then and now.

Malaysia attaches immense importance to the UN. In fact, Dr. Mahathir has spoken out bravely where none have dared before, eight times at the UN general Assembly alone; championing the cause of developing countries and fighting without fear or favour against injustices meted out against the Developing Nations.

These acts have won Kuala Lumpur many friends and admirers in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and even amongst small European and Asian countries, whose governments are afraid to speak out against "the developed 7" and the five permanent members of the Security Council - US,

Russia, China, Great Britain and France - for fear of political and economic reprisal.

A Southern European Permanent Representative at the UN told me repeatedly that he wishes his country (a member of Nato) "could do what Malaysia did, does and will continue doing at the UN".

I asked him what was stopping him or his Prime Minister. Obviously, his national pride injured, because of his country's lack of independent action, he said, "We are beholden to one or two of the major powers." The Cold War may have ended but the fears still linger. His country is a backwater state in the European Community.

Razali is able, outspoken and, popular. However, he would not have been where he is today without the backing Malaysia and Dr. Mahathir had cultivated at the UN and outside it. Razali's success is in part, the result of Malaysia's proactive and high profile foreign policy.

A lot of people say the President of UN General Assembly is only ceremonial figurehead, so why the excitement? It was true before but no longer so now. Today, it is an important role, and whatever one says, the President of the UN General Assembly has great moral force and influence.

He is a key player in maintaining and coordinating links among various groups and interests. It depends how each president uses or abuses his post. Razali pleased several members of the "Big Five" when he insisted that meetings start on time and adjourn as scheduled and demanded that prolix delegates speak briefly and to the point.

Razali's ascent, even if undiplomatic may give a new lease of life to the General Assembly which many countries believe has been playing second fiddle for far too long to the Security Council.

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